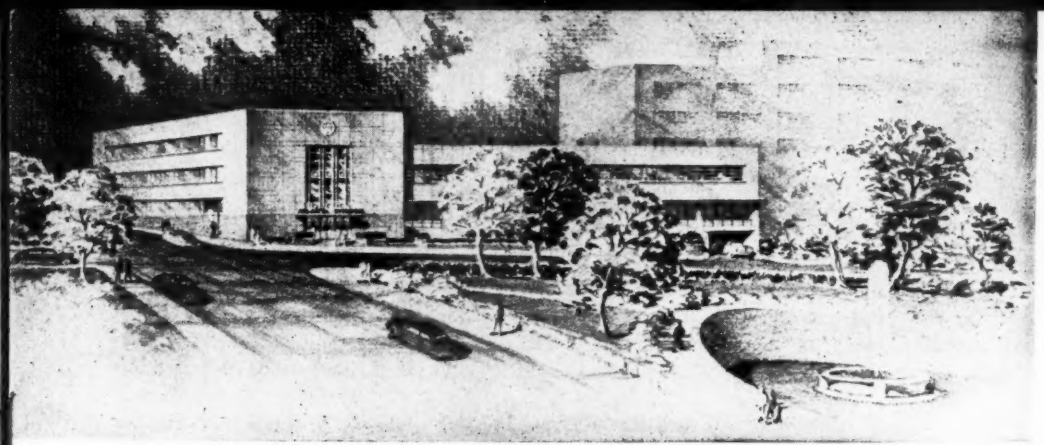

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A SCIENTIFIC BASIS FOR A UNITED STATES AGRICULTURAL POLICY

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When the first triple A was passed in 1933, it was looked upon as a temporary measure to be used only until a long range "policy" could be developed and adopted, and for this reason was referred to as a "program." So far Congress has found it easier to continue re-enacting the "program" rather than to adopt a new and far-reaching agricultural policy. The program of the present Administration is sometimes referred to as a "new policy." A close examination of the features of the program will reveal, however, that there is little which is new, and no one seriously thinks that it really come to grips with the fundamental problem of United States agriculture.

There are two separate and distinct—though closely related—steps in the process of developing and adopting a new and far-reaching social policy—the scientific and the political. The first involves the use of the laws and methods of the social sciences in a rigid scientific analysis in order to discover what the real problem is, what has caused it to arise, and what is needed to solve it. This is a task for the economists, statisticians, sociologists, political scientists, etc., and is a relatively simple task. The second involves, in the United States at least, persuading the people to adopt the programs developed by the experts and to accept the institutional change which will inevitably occur as a consequence of the new programs. This is an infinitely more difficult task, and it is one for the politician, the farm (etc.) organization leader, the journalist, writer, and other "propagandists." It is their function to take the dry, uninteresting data unearthed by the social scientists, and "sell" them to the public, somewhat in the same manner in which the advertising companies take a dry, flattened grain of wheat or corn and convince people that it is essential for their health, happiness, and success.[1] The first step, logically, must be taken before the second, but unless it results in a real and complete understanding of the problem, the "propagandists" will find themselves peddling quack remedies. It would appear that we have approached the problem of agriculture in the wrong manner, or more accurately, the social scientists concerned with the problem have not made adequate use of the tools of analysis which are available. This paper starts from the premise that the problem of agriculture has not been fully and widely understood because the first step in the process of developing and adopting an adequate agricultural policy has not been taken, and it is an attempt to remedy this defect by applying the available analytical tools to the analysis of the problem.

[1]There are some (called doctrinaire democrats by George Bernard Shaw) who believe strongly in what might be termed the pure theory of democracy, who deny the validity of this analysis, and decry it, claiming that such a state of affairs is not democracy. It does not fall within the scope of this paper to answer fully these criticisms, but the following statement made by Henry Vethake before the Mercantile Library Society of Philadelphia in 1839, is offered in support of the analysis: "The scientific knowledge of the political philosopher (my social scientist) will serve the statesman (my "propagandist") as a sure and constant guide to what quarter in the field of political improvement he should direct his exertions; telling him what old laws should be repealed and what new ones enacted, as soon as the opinions of those with whom or for whom he is called upon to act will allow. And even where the force of public opinion is such as to exact from the legislator or statesman the most implicit obedience to its dictates when unequivocally expressed, he will, in consequence of the science of the political philosopher, be furnished with the means of giving that very public opinion a beneficial direction. While acknowledging himself to be the servant of the people, he is a servant who has no small influence with his masters. There is, indeed, no country where the statesman has an opportunity of controlling in a greater degree the opinions of the people than in these United States. "The Distinctive Provinces of the Political Philosopher and the Statesman." **Hunt's Merchants Magazine,** II (February, 1840), p. 120.

The best beginning for a valid understanding of the problem of agriculture is to see it as a result of one of the most fundamental laws in social science, i. e., the absolute necessity for new institutions or mutations of existing institutions to arise whenever new technology is developed, but the difficulty of this happening because of the universal inability of man to change his rules as fast as he changes his tools.

Behind this law is a specific theory of social change, the bare outlines of which will be given here. The theory starts from what Veblen, and others who have formulated and developed it, hold to be a fact, i. e., that all the myriads of things used and activities engaged in by human beings for the production of goods and services, can be classified as "technology," or as "institutions."[2] That is to say, the machines, tools, and techniques in an automobile factory are technological in nature, and different in kind from the corporation charter, collective bargaining contract, stocks and bonds through which the factory becomes a going concern, and which are institutional in character. The theory holds that for some reason, which is attributed to many different causes,[3] there occur changes in the technology, and it becomes increasingly more difficult to operate the newer technology with the old institutions. There seems to be considerably less opposition to adopting the new technology, and hence to discarding the old, than to developing new institutions which are more conducive to an efficient and rational use of the technology.[4] For example, it is not difficult to show the stockholders of General Motors that modern assembly line method of production is more efficient, technologically, for the production of automobiles than the old handicraft method, but it would be exceedingly difficult to persuade them that a cooperative would be a better institution under which to organize for business than a corporation. Or an example from agriculture: It was relatively easy to demonstrate to the United States farmer during the latter half of the 19th century that reapers, horse-drawn plows, and threshers were more efficient than scythes, hoes, and flails,[5] but it took considerable effort and several depressions to get him to accept production controls, parity prices, and the many institutional changes of the 1930's. Now that he has accepted them, it is not as easy to persuade him to accept flexible prices and no controls as it is to plant hybrid corn or purchase a tractor.

Modern social scientists have been struck by this phenomenon, and have called it the "social lag, i. e., the lagging of the societal arts behind the technological arts." Professor Zimmermann has described it as follows:

To be truly successful, every new invention, every new machine, should have a counterpart invention, a counterpart device, in the realm of social institutions. Not only must the potency of the social adjustment be comparable to the power of the impact (of the invention); but also its tempo, its speed. A society that blindly promotes technological advance

[2]One of the principal areas of controversy in this theory is that of the exact definition of an "institution." This conflict, obviously, cannot be resolved herein, but the following definition has always seemed to the writer to be the best one: "Institution is a verbal symbol which for want of a better describes a cluster of social usages. It connotes a way of thought or action of some prevalence and permanence, which is embedded in the habits and customs of a people. In ordinary speech it is another word for procedure, convention, or arrangement; in the language of books, it is the singular of which the mores or folkways are the plural. Institutions fix the confines of and impose form upon the activities of human beings. The world of use and wont, to which we imperfectly accomodate ourselves, is a tangled and unbroken web of institutions . . . Our culture is a synthesis —or at least an aggregation—of institutions, each of which has its own domain, and its distinctive office. The function of each is to set a pattern of behavior and to fix a zone of tolerance for an activity or a complement of activities." Walton Hamilton, "Institution," **Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences,** The MacMillan Company, Vol. 8, p. 84, 1932, (printed with publisher's permission).

[3]Another area where there are differences of opinion.

[4]"Institutionalists" of the Veblenian tradition hold that institutions are always inhibitory to the development of technology. Others hold that there may be institutional frameworks which may promote the advance of science and technology. This is another argument which need not be considered in this paper.

[5]A leading Iowa hybrid corn breeder and scientific farmer recently told a Harvard University graduate seminar in Agricultural Economics that United States farmers today were willing to accept new technology at a much faster rate than at any time in the past, and maintained that economists inside and outside Government did not fully appreciate this.

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and one-sidely pushes the progress of the natural and applied sciences, relying on fate to provide the necessary corollaries in the field of the societal adjustments is bound to come to grief.[6]

Let us examine the history of United States agriculture during the past 150 years in the light of this theory, and at the same time make use of the analytical tools of economics. It has been said, and with a considerable measure of truth, that the United States farmer in 1800 was using the same tools and methods used by the Israelites. The labor power was largely performed by the farmer himself, aided a bit by oxen. Agriculture was predominantly subsistence agriculture. During the first half of the 19th century, numerous machines adapted to animal power were invented. As the farmer adopted these new machines after the Civil War, United States agriculture began to change from "man-power," subsistence agriculture to "horse-power," commercial agriculture, and by 1920, the horse and mule had replaced the man and ox as the principal source of power on the farm. With this change, the ancient agricultural problem of finding enough to eat and wear became one of finding enough eaters and wearers to purchase the products at profitable prices.

By 1920, then, the "horse-power" revolution in United States agriculture was complete, and it was obvious to farm leaders and farmers that an institutional change was overdue. Many programs and schemes were formulated and advocated during the 1920's, but it is significant that they were not adopted until the 1930 depression forced their adoption. But what is even more significant, from the standpoint of the "social lag" theory, is that the ante-bellum Southern cotton planters, who, in the 1840's, were the first United States farmers to face the modern disease of "surplusitis," formulated and advocated, in embryo form, most of the policies adopted in the 1930's.[7]

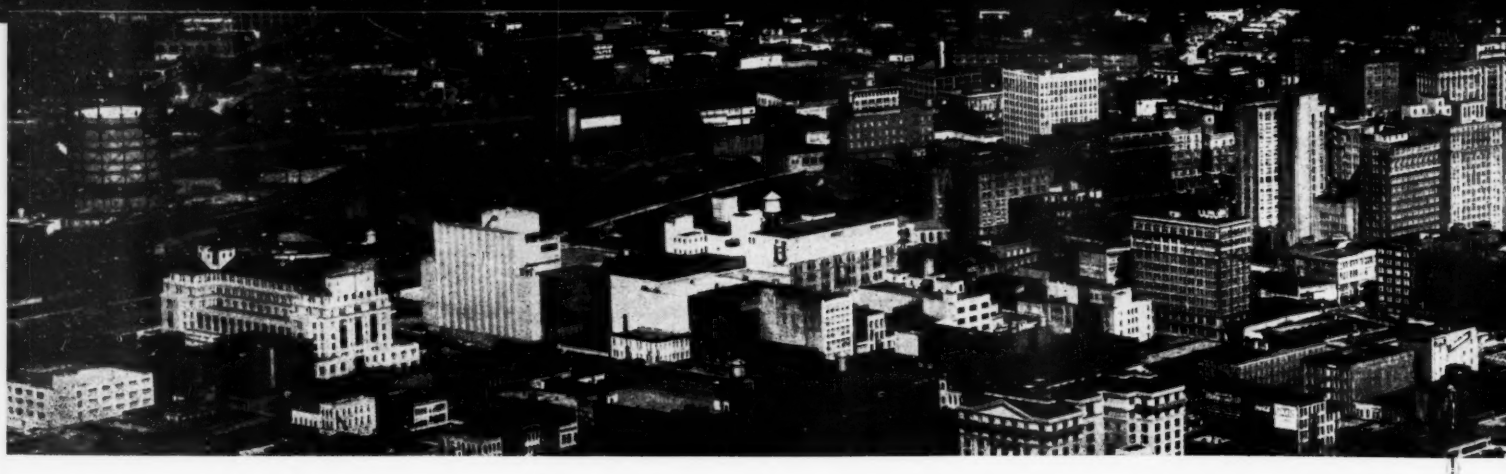
Thus it is seen that the inevitable advance of technology in agriculture would have brought a severe strain on the institutional framework and brought new problems needing to be solved. This strain was intensified, and the problems rendered more difficult of solution (1) because of the economic characteristics of agriculture, and (2) because of other social and technological developments outside agriculture. These will be briefly enumerated at this point.

The most outstanding economic characteristic of agriculture, and one which is not fully appreciated, is its competitive nature. Agriculture is virtually the only industry where the modern economist can find examples of the classical model of competition — many sellers, each seller selling an identical product, no one seller or group of sellers having any control of the price at which the product sells, and buyers choose between sellers solely on the basis of price. This makes agriculture unique in the United States economy, being almost the only form of business enterprise left in the United States that is afflicted with the old-fashioned variety of competition and not blessed with some new-fangled monopolistic sort. This means that the farmer's market position (compared with most other groups) as a seller of farm products is generally weak. It is also true that he is at a serious disadvantage as a buyer of industrial products, for here he faces a market which is monopolistic-competitive or oligopolistic. Furthermore, he is unable to control or limit the introduction of new machines or techniques, for they come from outside agriculture, from the industrial sector of the economy. This fact, plus the competitive nature of agriculture, makes it inevitable that every farmer will adopt as soon as possible any new machine or technique which lowers the cost of production if he is to continue in business. Hence the farmer is in the unenviable situation of being constantly between the devil and the deep blue sea. There is the irresistible pressure to make new capital expenditures in purchasing equipment from the industrial sector of the economy, where a greater or lesser degree of monopoly, and hence control of price (usually upward), exists, the result of which is to enable the farmer to produce larger quantities of products to be sold in a competitive market, and hence, in the absence of price control, at lower and lower prices.

From the above it is obvious that the farmer would have experienced dire economy conditions sooner or later even if his situation had not been worsened by social developments over which he had no control. The relatively enormous increase, between 1860 and 1920, in the ability of United States agriculture to produce happened to coincide with one of the most significant social developments in the history of the Western world—a slowing down in the rate of increase of the population. The importance of this development has been, and is, obscured by a too rigid acceptance of the Malthusian "law of population," and by the recent increase in the birth rate. Its significance for agriculture is hardly ever incorporated into analyses of the problem. This development has adversely affected agriculture because of a further economic characteristic of the industry. "Demand" in the economic sense is composed of two elements: individuals who are (1) willing and (2) able to purchase a product. It is obvious that the effect of a decrease in individuals could be more than offset by an increase in income. Since there has been a large increase in income (and apparently a more equal distribution) since 1900, it would appear that the decrease in the rate of growth of population would not seriously affect the "demand" for agricultural products. But here again

[6]Erich W. Zimmermann, **World Resources and Industries**, Harper and Brothers, rev. ed. pp. 165-6.

[7]See **De Bow's Review**, Vols. V-XVIII (1845-1855) **passim.**



MAY
ATLANTA AREA ECONOMIC INDICATORS

ITEM	MAY 1955	APRIL 1955	% Change	MAY 1954	% Change
EMPLOYMENT					
Job Insurance (Unemployment) Payments	$242,241	$254,505	−4.8	$343,524	−29.5
Job Insurance Claimants†	3,896	4,546	−14.3	5,644	−31.0
Total Non-Agricultural Employment	309,750	306,100*	+1.2	297,850	+4.0
Manufacturing Employment	86,400	86,100*	+0.3	78,900	+9.5
Average Weekly Earnings, Factory Workers	$67.56	$67.56*	0.0	$62.41	+8.3
Average Weekly Hours, Factory Workers	40.7	40.7*	0.0	39.5	+3.0
Number Help Wanted Ads	11,328	9,748	+16.2	7,236	+56.6
CONSTRUCTION					
Number Building Permits, City of Atlanta	1,077	1,085	−0.7	944	+11.4
Value Building Permits, City of Atlanta	$6,253,622	$5,257,219	+19.0	$4,443,834	+40.7
Employees in Contract Construction	19,450	18,300*	+6.3	16,000	+21.6
FINANCIAL					
Bank Debits (Millions)	$1,426.6	$1,355.5	+5.2	$1,226.8	+16.3
Total Deposits (Millions) (Last Wednesday)	$1,001.8	$1,002.8	−0.1	$935.2	+7.1
POSTAL§					
Postal Receipts	$1,479,283	$1,426,906	+3.7	$1,308,314	+13.1
Poundage 2nd Class Mail	1,455,590	1,599,003	−9.0	1,346,501	+8.1
OTHER					
Department Store Sales Index (Adjusted) (1947-49=100)	145	151	−4.0	126*	+15.1
Retail Food Price Index (1947-49=100)	111.1	110.8	+0.3	114.1	−2.6
Number Telephones in Service	259,519	258,896	+0.2	247,277	+5.0

*Revised

‡City of Atlanta only.

†Claimants include both the unemployed and those with job attachments, but working short hours.

Sources: All data on employment, unemployment, hours, and earnings: Employment Security Agency, Georgia Department of Labor; Number Help Wanted Ads: Atlanta Newspapers, Inc.; Building permits data: Office of the Building Inspector, Atlanta, Georgia; Financial data: Board of Governors, Federal Reserve System; Postal data: Atlanta Post Office; Retail Food Price Index: U. S. Department of Labor; Department Store Sales and Stocks Indexes: Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta and Board of Governors, Federal Reserve System; Telephones in Service: Southern Bell Telephone and Telegraph Company.

JANUARY THROUGH MAY, 1954 and 1955

1955	1954	ITEM	% CHANGE
$34,089,578	$23,679,934†	Value Building Permits, City of Atlanta	+44.0
45,405	33,251	Number Help Wanted Ads	+36.6
18,140	15,080	No. Construction Employees*	+20.3
N.A.	N.A.	Department Store Sales** Based on Dollar Amounts	+15.0
N.A.	N.A.	Department Store Stocks**	+12.0
$6,861.7	$6,255.3	Bank Debits (Millions)	+9.7
4,735	4,326	Number of Building Permits, City of Atlanta	+9.5
84,320	78,600	Number Manufacturing Employees*	+7.3
$1,001.8	$935.2	Total Deposits (Millions)**	+7.1
7,053,020	6,623,139	Poundage 2nd Class Mail, Atlanta Post Office	+6.5
$66.20	$62.41	Average Weekly Earnings, Factory Workers*	+6.1
$7,215,149	$6,829,366	Postal Receipts, Atlanta Post Office	+5.7
259,519	247,277	Telephones in Service**	+5.0
305,310	296,750	Total Non-Agricultural Employment*	+2.9
40.5	39.6	Average Weekly Hours, Factory Workers*	+2.3
111.1	114.1	Retail Food Price Index (May)	−2.6
23,845	28,476	Job Insurance Claimants	−16.3

†Special ruling permitted construction of $20,500,000 Grady Hospital addition without permit. If included, total above is $44,179,934 and the change becomes minus 22.8%.

*Average Month
**End of Period
N.A.—Not Available
Sources: Same as page 4

agriculture is at a disadvantage because the "income elasticity for agricultural products, especially food, is less than one," which, in the jargon of the economist, means that as income increases a smaller percentage of the increase is spent for agricultural products.[8]

It is seen that the tremendous impact of the new technology of the 19th century, the economic nature of agriculture (especially in comparison with the other sectors of the economy), and an important social development like the slowing down in the rate of growth of population, which contributed greatly to the relative decrease in effective demand for farm products, could alone easily account for agriculture being the economic problem child of the United States by 1930. But there are several other factors that aggravated the situation. The older age groups, requiring less food, were (and are) more numerous than in the past. There was (and still is) a change from a predominately rural population, where fresh air and physical exercise is the norm, to a predominately urban population, where "smog" and office work predominate. Technological developments replaced many farm products with mining and industrial products as raw materials for many products—oleomargine made from whale oil is used in Europe instead of butter and lard formerly used; vegetable and animal dyes have been replaced by coal tar dyes; and hemp rope by steel rope, to mention only a few of the many developments. And lastly, the institution of the protective tariff seriously decreased foreign "demand" for United States agricultural products by making it difficult for the citizens of foreign countries to obtain dollars with which to buy the products.[9]

About 1920, or just when the 19th century technological revolution reached its climax, there began developments in United States agriculture which furnished a classic example of the "institutionalist" theory of social change. This was (and is) an "Industrial Revolution" exactly like the one in industry, which began in England in the latter quarter of the 18th century, and soon spread to the rest of "the Western world." Just as in industry, this "Revolution" has been experienced in two directions—the application of machine power and the application of science. There is a plethora of data showing the kinds and number of new machines and innumerable specific scientific advances. Only their general character will be indicated herein; for the actual data, the reader is invited to peruse the numerous farm journals, the census returns, and the *Agricultural Yearbook* for the past ten or fifteen years.

The application of machine power is represented by number of tractors (together with the many types of special equipment for use with the tractor) and trucks on farms, and by the number of farms having electricity (and the many kinds of equipment run by electricity.) The application of science —which is perhaps more important, though not so spectacular, than machine power—has been felt in four fields: (1) fertilization, (2) soil improvement ——leguminous vegetable fats and oils, hays, etc., (3) improved breeds of plants and animals, and better feeds for and methods of feeding the improved animals, and (4) new insecticides and plant and animal disease control. The effects of the application of machine power are two: (1) increase of productivity per man, and (2) release of millions of acres of land formerly devoted to producing food for work animals for use in producing food for human consumption. The effect of the application of science is to increase the yield per acre, per animal, etc. Again, there are numerous data showing specific increases in output per man, per acre, and per animal, which can be found in the above mentioned publications, and in other publications of the Department of Agriculture. The following quotation is sufficient to show the general nature of the results of the "Industrial Revolution" of the 20th century for United States agriculture.

> Farmers in the United States (have) achieved a remarkable production record. The increase in total farm output from 1935-39 to 1944 was twice as large as during the entire period 1919-23 to 1935-39 . . . The output of farm products available for human use for the three full years, 1942-44, averaged 128 per cent of the pre-war years, 1935-39. This was accomplished without a significantly increased expansion in the acreage of cropland, and despite scarce supplies of labor, farm machinery, and farm materials. The high level reached during the war has been maintained in the early post-war years. In 1946 the level was 133 per cent of pre-war. Despite a short corn crop the output in 1947 averaged 129 per cent of pre-war . . . With a bumper corn crop in 1948, farm output reached the record total of 148 per cent of 1935-39.[10]

If the theory of social change which underlies this paper is correct, then the institutions developed and programs adopted during the 1930's are not adequate to handle the newer technology. It is obvious that the surpluses with which United States agriculture was burdened in the '20's and '30's are literally "drops in the bucket" compared with those which are possible today, and especially which will be possible tomorrow. The uneasiness with which the present farm policy is viewed by many is a reflection of the awareness that all is not well, even if not of an understanding of what is involved. It is the major contention of this paper that an adequate understanding can come only if the technological revolution of the past 30 years is made the central feature of the analysis of the farm problem, and not merely included, if at all, on the periphery.

[8]Theodore W. Schultz, *Economic Organization of Agriculture*, McGraw-Hill, Ch. V.

[9]It is true that this latter handicap has been offset since World War II by the numerous foreign aid programs, but it would appear that, politically speaking, we have reached the point of diminishing returns in this direction.

[10]Sherman E. Johnson, *Changes in American Farming*, United States Department of Agriculture, Miscellaneous Publication No. 707, p. 1.

The symptoms of the problem of United States agriculture, which are (1) low average income of farmers relative to all other major groups in the economy, and (2) a surplus of farmers (or what is the same thing, under-employment in agriculture) remain, and in an intensified form. An adequate policy should aim at raising the average income of farmers, and reducing drastically the number of persons on farms. The programs up to the present have been designed to raise the average income of farmers, and the second symptom has been ignored, or left to "natural forces." Stated another way, we have tried to save the individual farmer, rather than save agriculture, or adequately integrate it with the rest of the economy. It would seem that the strongest emphasis must be placed on the second symptom if United States agriculture is ever to "stand on its own feet" and "cease being a drain on the Treasury."

At this point a corollary of the "social lag" theory, one that is not always fully appreciated, should be emphasized. This is that although institutions lag behind the technological developments, they eventually do change, or in other words, the change is "forced" and shaped by the nature of the technological change. It follows from this that the time span of the lag might be shortened by recognition of the law, and considerable hardship and future trouble eliminated by some conscious planning of the change. As a matter of fact, the institutional change required to remove the second symptom, i. e., a movement of farmers to the city, is rapidly occurring, but in such a manner that the economy may suffer in the future. What is happening, as the population census statistics reveal, is that the farm population is largely very young, or above middle age. For example, the 1950 census shows that 41.5 per cent of the total population of Alabama were between 20 and 50 years of age, for urban the percentage was 46.8, while for farm, it was only 34.2. For under 20, the respective percentages were 41.4, 35.9, and 48.0. This indicates that relatively few people between the productive ages of 20 and 50 are on farms. It would seem that a program which made it possible for a young man to provide himself with an adequate-sized farm, with modern buildings and equipment, would tend to make this inevitable institutional change more rational and beneficial to the future of the economy.

To summarize, an adequate agricultural policy should be the proper integration of 1955 agriculture with the other elements of the economy so that it can perform its function in a manner which is conducive to the best functioning of the entire economy. This would require, with present technology, that from 1/3 to 1/2 of the present number of farmers move to the city, and the purchase of their farms by those remaining. The detailed feature of the programs, required to accomplish this cannot be spelled out herein, but there would need to be at least three major features of the programs. First, the farmers moving to the city would have to be subsidized while they are learning a trade.[11] (This part of the program might well include some planning to make cities more "liveable.") Second, the farmers remaining on the farms would require long-term, low interest loans with which to purchase the land and up-to-date equipment for expanding their operations to a size commensurate with the profitable requirements of modern agriculture. Third, *local* entrepreneurs should be provided with sufficient credit with which to build the industry for employing those farmers who leave the farm.

The writer believes that if this could be done, most, if not all, price supports could be eventually removed—the farmer, as well as the consumer, would benefit from the lower prices since even today most food, and all clothing, is purchased by the farmer, and surely the envisaged fewer farmers will, and should, purchase everything they require (incidentally, this not "living at home" violates a strong more of United States agriculture, along with the one mentioned in footnote 12 below.)—yet average income of farmers would rise. It is further believed that total agricultural output would not fall, and probably would increase. The increased investment and income resulting from the expansion of facilities to process farm products, furnish new equipment, build new urban houses and farm buildings, etc., will go a long way to help the United States continue "prosperity in peacetime" for a long time to come.[12]

(The reader, if interested in the technological progress of agriculture, may be interested in reading an article by Gilbert Burck in the June 1955 issue of *Fortune* which discusses in detail the rapid advances that have been made and are being made by agriculture in mechanization and use of new techniques developed by science—Editor.)

[11]This feature was recently recommended by a group with the indubitable eminence of the American Assembly. See **New York Times,** May 9, 1955, p. 20.

[12]The major opposition to such a policy outlined herein, which would decrease drastically the number of farmers, and increase greatly the size of the average farm, both in acres and value of assets, would come from those who refuse to accept the political results which must follow from the declining economic importance of agriculture, and from the leaders of the farm organizations, all of whom place considerable emphasis on the "family farm" without ever definitely defining just what a "family farm" is. Professor John D. Black recently attempted to assuage the fears of those who see a threat to the "family farm" in the movement toward larger farms, though his comments probably will not satisfy the farm organization leaders. See Professor Black's article, "Family Farms on the Way Out?," *Boston Sunday Globe,* March 27, 1955, p. 14-A.

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